

Unity in a Segregated Society

Mark 3: 20-26

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

Four years ago, it was the first time I experienced our two churches coming together. The Spirit’s breeze blew on that day. I know it because I kept hearing the same question rising from within both congregations: “Why is this the only time we come together?” Well, here we are four years later sitting under the pavilion of our annual tradition still asking the same old question.

We might admit, the concept of unity takes energy. It may take more energy than some of us have at the current moment. It requires us showing up even if we don’t want to. It requires us putting ourselves out there once again. Unity requires trust, commitment, courage [*other words from congregation*]. It is hard to feel a sense of unity when society’s fault lines remain beneath us and our conversations. It is hard to feel that we really are united, when we gather one Sunday out of the year and then head back to our black and white worlds.

After the Unitarian Universalist Church in town was vandalized for hanging a “Black Lives Matter” banner, community leaders gathered together to make a public statement against racism. At that event the challenge went out for Winston Salem churches to hang their own Black Lives Matter banners as a way of creating a front against these blatant racist gestures. Then PIRD wondered what it could look like for us to engage in our own process by inviting our entire presbytery—all 139 churches—to endorse the Black Lives Matter movement by hanging up a banner at our own sites. Not as a token action, but as a sign of public witness committed to doing the work of dismantling systemic racism in our own communities.

Over the last couple months PIRD has crafted a recommendation and rationale for our presbytery to consider. Our proposal has already been endorsed by our presbytery’s Peace and Justice Task Force and will be introduced at our August presbytery meeting with the vote hopefully happening at the November presbytery meeting. In between the two meetings—between the month of August and November—we will be sending trained liaisons, some from our congregations, to different areas of our presbytery to host neighborhood conversations about racial justice. In order to get the recommendation passed and taken seriously, we have to convey that, at its core, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) is about forming an anti-racist coalition against consistent, and often flagrant, acts of violence against people of color. It is a movement of God’s Spirit, we argue in the document, because it aims at exercising the demons in our country that have championed segregation, made the prison-industrial complex

lucrative, continues under resource our black children in schools, and lusts to build walls which separate families at America's borders.

Although most PIRD clergy do support this, there are some who feel that their churches are not "there yet." Some say they need more time to study white privilege—as if white privilege is a new phenomenon. (Now I'm all for educating and examining ourselves. Just as long as we realize that it is our white privilege that gives us as much time as we need to study and examine, while in the meantime black bodies continue to be slaughtered in the streets.) Others say endorsing BLM won't move the needle much. But we most certainly know that doing nothing won't move the needle at all and will only reinforce the status quo.

So here is where you all come in: I believe that if anyone can show our presbytery what is possible for churches to work toward racial justice together it is us—Dellabrook and Trinity. We know it won't be easy. Like what Jesus had to put up with, some might say we are quixotic or out of our mind; some will say we are stirring the pot and need to tone it down. Some might even say we are possessed by a divisive-spirit—which is the same thing religious folk have said to Rev. H.H. Garnett, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr and not to mention Jesus Christ himself. But tell me: how can we be the divisive ones when we are trying to cast out the demonic presence of racism which divides our city and splits America's sin-sick soul? Or to put it in Jesus' words, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

The other day when I was feeling discouraged, Rev. Eversley reminded me of Dr. King's words: "Almost always, it is the creative and dedicated minority which makes a better world." The creative and dedicated minority. That's us.

Maybe nothing will come of PIRD's proposal...or maybe, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's wind will stir up in us what is possible once again. The same God who liberated an entire nation from captivity can free us all once again. The same God who sent Jesus to challenge the institutions of privilege, can strengthen our core to challenge those systems once again. That same Holy Spirit of fire and wind who mended together all ethnicities, cultures, tongues and races...

The same Spirit who unifies and dignifies.

The same Spirit who sanctifies and edifies.

The same Spirit who heals and reveals.

The same Spirit who sustains and remains.

The same Spirit who gifts us and lifts us.

The same Spirit who galvanizes, organizes and mobilizes efforts for justice on this very soil that we pronounce is holy ground.

That same Spirit of the gospel who called our two fine churches together back in 1981 is still blowing her Good News breeze on us today saying, "Now is the time for us to get bold and active. Now is the time for us to seek fierce unity. Now is the time for us to exorcise racism's demons hand in hand because a kingdom divided cannot stand." So, my sisters and brothers, are we in? Or are we going to come back to our annual picnic next year asking the same old questions?